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Leah Chase on Callaloo/Gumbo Z'herbes: An Interview

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## LEAH CHASE ON CALLALOO/GUMBO Z'HERBES

### An Interview

by Charles Henry Rowell with John O'Neal

*As we went about conducting interviews and gathering other materials in New Orleans for the special Hurricane Katrina issue of Callaloo, John O'Neal agreed, on July 29, 2006, to drive photographer Wendell Gordon and me to visit the internationally known chef, Leah Chase. I felt that an interview with her, unlike those I was conducting with other New Orleanians, would give me information on two different subjects for two different special issues of Callaloo: on the dish callaloo, as it is known in New Orleans, and, of course, on the impact of Katrina on her home and family business, the Dooky Chase Restaurant, a New Orleans institution. When we reached her restaurant in historic Tremé, I immediately noticed the little white FEMA trailer across the street, which had become home for Ms. Chase and her husband, Dooky Chase. John O'Neal led us up the newly constructed unpainted steps of their trailer and knocked on its fragile door. Without ceremony, we entered their close quarters, made our greetings, identified ourselves, and announced the purpose of our visit. What follows is only part one of the interview we taped.*

**ROWELL:** Do you ever make callaloo?

**CHASE:** John, give him my cookbook over there on that table. A recipe for gumbo z'herbes is in it. Gumbo z'herbes is very much like callaloo. I think the only difference in our gumbo is the greens. For gumbo z'herbes, you chop up greens, and you add ham or the crabs—whatever you want to put in it. The people down in Haiti (or wherever callaloo came from) put their okra in it—and talk about good, ya'll. You mix those greens and that okra, and that gumbo z'herbes will knock your socks off, it's so good. But we didn't add okra, you know, when it came through the islands—this gumbo z'herbes. I think we got a lot of our food from Africa by way of the Caribbean.

Let me tell you the story about gumbo z'herbes, if you don't already know it. We used to eat gumbo z'herbes once a year, only on Holy Thursday. That was the Thursday before Easter Sunday. You know New Orleans was predominantly Catholic. Gumbo z'herbes would be our last big meal before Easter Sunday. You see, on Good Friday they wouldn't let you eat anything. If you ate anything, it was just a little bite of toast in the morning or something. You had to fast, you see, until Easter. So they cooked this gumbo z'herbes. It was greens, just ground greens. You'd put chicken in it, ham in it, sausage in it—all kinds of meats in it—and that was your dinner on Holy Thursday before Easter. That was your big dinner. I don't know where the Creoles come in. You know, they supposed to be su-

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## CALLALOO

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perstitious, but I don't know if they so superstitious. That comes from down in the islands too. That is, all the voodoo and whatever superstitions they brought with them.

Let me tell you this joke. You have to put an uneven numbers of greens in a pot.

**ROWELL:** An uneven number?

**CHASE:** Yes, an uneven number: five, seven, nine, eleven. You can't go with even numbers.

**O'NEAL:** What kind of greens?

**CHASE:** Different types of greens. You have to put a mixture of greens in the pot, but it has to be different types of greens. You can't put two kinds; you can't just put mustards and collards in, and call it a day. That's bad luck. You can't put four greens. You've got to go with the uneven numbers, dear, so you don't take a chance.

**O'NEAL & ROWELL:** [*Laughing.*]

**CHASE:** So you grind the greens up and make that green gumbo. But the joke about that, John, is this: That's supposed to be *our* thing, you know. And the *Creoles de couleur*, as we call them, have their own thing.

**O'NEAL:** Yeah. Yeah.

**CHASE:** You know? There're Creoles, and *Creoles*, you'll find out in New Orleans. You go uptown and the Commander's Palace say, "Well we're Creole." And this one will say, "We're Creole." You come down on this end of the city, and "We're Creoles, too." "We're another kind of Creole," you know?

**O'NEAL:** [*Laughing.*]

**CHASE:** But it's the funniest thing though. John, when we do this on Holy Thursday, we're the superstitious ones. We get the greens, and sometimes I have to plant black people in my dining room in the restaurant.

**O'NEAL:** [*Laughing.*]

**CHASE:** One year I had *Southern Living* Magazine coming to the restaurant. All of my reservations had been filled, and the whole dining room was white. I called my daughter, who had a principal who was really, really dark skin. I said, "You better send Dr. Lang, and let me put him in the middle of this dining room here."

**O'NEAL & ROWELL:** [*Laughing.*]

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## C A L L A L O O

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**CHASE:** 'Cause this is what we got.

**O'NEAL:** Next time, call me.

**ALL:** [*Laughing.*]

**ROWELL:** And I'll come here all the way from Texas.

**CHASE:** You'll come from Texas? [*Laughs.*] But everybody comes if you have something good, no matter what it is. And people will come from all over on Holy Thursday to get that gumbo z'herbes. But this year I didn't have the space at all to cook it and serve it.

\* \* \*

**ROWELL:** Will you talk about the everyday gumbo you make here in New Orleans? How does gumbo z'herbes differ from gumbo—okra gumbo or filé gumbo?

**CHASE:** We do okra gumbo. As I said earlier, as recipes come down the line in the community, you change them according to the products or ingredients you're going to use. So when that gumbo came down all the way from Africa through the islands, it was made with okra, I would imagine, because that is gumbo. But when it gets here, we begin to live among American Indians, who have sassafras, which is what we call filé. They grind the sassafras leaves, and that makes the thickener. We leave the okra out, and we use the Indian sassafras to thicken the gumbo. So, we have what we call filé gumbo, and that's what we call the original Creole gumbo. In that gumbo, we have crabs, shrimps, chicken, sausage, ham, and veal stew. You see, the Creoles like a lot of meat in their dinners. You know that, don't you, John? You know the more meat you can give a Creole, the more he likes the dish. "Put that meat in there." They want to see the meat. They don't want a gumbo without meat in it. So, you put all that meat in there and the flavors combine and one flavor takes on another and you've got this good dish. Oh yeah, we make it with a roux—that is, gravy made of flour that is browned. Then we put the filé into the roux. When we make okra gumbo, we just do the shrimp and the crab and the okra and tomatoes. That's a thickener itself. If you cook that okra down, you don't need to put a thickener into the gumbo, because it's going to be already thick. So, we do that okra gumbo, too. Then, you know, strangely enough, the okra gumbo has become—is becoming—more popular than the filé gumbo. When you come to New Orleans, you know everybody makes a gumbo—I mean everybody: white, black, blue, green, and yellow. They all make the gumbo. Each gumbo is different, you know. There's always a controversy about what goes in a gumbo and about how you make a gumbo.

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**CHASE:** So, I'm sitting with and talking with Frank Brightson. He's got his restaurant uptown, Brightson's on Dante Street. Cajun, I think. He's good, good, good. He worked with Paul Prudhomme for years before he fledged out on his own. He's good—he's real good. So, he's making his roux, and he puts the filé in the roux. I said, "What in the world is that? Oh! That's a marvelous thing!" He said, "Leah, according to you, in this gumbo, I've made more marvelous things . . ." [*Laughs.*]

**O'NEAL:** [*Laughing.*]

**CHASE:** I said, "I guess you're right." But the end product came out good. So, you see, you can take food and do what you want with it, turn it into whatever you want, and then you have a good gumbo. But the way I make this filé gumbo is the way the Creoles always made it. They had the crabs, the veal stew . . . now why the veal stew? I never know, because veal stew is so light. You come in with this big, heavy smoked sausage, and this sausage that we called chorizo. It's a fresh, hot sausage. So, you come in with all the powerful flavors, and you throw this stew meat in. It really doesn't give any flavor, but I think the Creoles put it in to make more meat in the thing and it picks up the flavors. So, then when you eat that piece of stew out of there, it's got a good taste and a good flavor because it's picked up all the sausage flavors and everything. So, you make that with all of that and make you a good roux and put your filé in there. It's really, really a good product.

**ROWELL:** How long do you let this boil? And when do you put the shrimp or other seafood into the boiling pot?

**CHASE:** You cook the shrimp last. After this whole pot comes to a boil, you then put it on the fire and you don't let it roll boiling, darling. You got to let it do what the Creoles call "mitonner." Now don't ask me what "mitonner" means.

**ROWELL:** "Mitonner"? Okay.

**CHASE:** I don't know. It just means simmer down. It's in my book. [*Laughs.*] So, you let it simmer down on a low fire, and then you put your shrimp in. You see, shrimp is going to be cooked in a couple of minutes. Then when that's all done, you stir in your filé. If you want to use oysters in your gumbo, then you put them in now. But people shy away from oysters in that gumbo, particularly in restaurants, because, you know, they tend to turn dark; the oysters will really turn your gumbo dark. What I do instead is drain the oysters off and put the oyster water for flavor in that gumbo. You find out that there are all kinds of gumbos. But I make gumbo the way the Creoles made it.